

John Brown's Last Speech To The Court, 1859

"May it please the court, a few words to say...in the first place I deny everything but that which I have all along admitted, a plan on my part to free slaves. I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to incite slaves to revolt or to make insurrection. I have another objection. That is, it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty.

Had I interfered in the manner which I did in behalf of the rich and powerful, would it have been all right? Every man in the court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward, not of punishment . . . I see a book placed here, which I suppose to be the Bible. That teaches me that whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so unto them.

It teaches me further to remember those in bonds as bonded with them. I believe that to interfere as I have done in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong but right.

Now, if it is necessary that I should forfeit my life and further mingle my life with the blood of my children and the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel and unjust enactments, I submit, let it be done."

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was his demeanor in addressing the court? Did he act fearful of facing the death penalty?
2. How did he rely on a "higher authority" to convey his ideas? Why do you think he did so?
3. Did he appear knowledgeable, educated and articulate?
4. Even though he lost a son and would lose his own life, Brown concluded with the words "let it be done". What personal values were evident in this statement?
5. Would this be a man you could be friends with? Why or why not?
6. After his speech, the judge pronounced the sentence: "death by hanging." Why did the judge say: "May God forgive you?"
7. Why might both a Northerner and Southerner say John Brown got what he deserved? Did he?
8. John Brown later went on to say: "I am quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land can never be purged but with blood." Of what crimes was he speaking? Was he correct?
9. Was John Brown an effective speaker? Why? What particular words or speaking qualities influenced your decision?

